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Piety, Faith, and Spirituality in the Quest for the Historical Luther

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If it were possible to recover the past with a total objectivity—and to write history “as it actually happened”—then the quest for the “historical” Luther would also be the search for the “real” Luther. Although aware that such a quest can never reach fulfillment, Luther scholars have not been detained from at least seeking to find the centre of Martin Luther’s thought. And this has not been an arbitrary venture, but one due to at least three factors. *First*, Luther wrote an immense amount, at the same time producing neither a *Summa Theologiae* nor a *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. In order to find one’s way into Martin Luther (even if one does not intend to go through Luther), it is necessary to have a point of reference, most usefully a central, organizing principle. *Second*, Luther scholarship in the last hundred years has produced entirely too many books and research articles.¹ This veritable flood of material, although moving somewhat more slowly during the last decade,² is formidable. In this generation an ecumenical venture, Luther scholarship can humbly pride itself on immense accomplishments. It has largely agreed upon at least some central themes, and perhaps even the centre itself—only to be challenged again. *Third*, Luther scholarship is often, at least to a measure, convinced, that in some significant way Martin Luther continues to speak to the religious issues of the faith. Accordingly, is there a particularly appropriate approach which leads to “the best” in Luther?

I

In the eighteenth³ century the organizing principle for the understanding of Luther was his personality. In assessing it,

the secular historians generally celebrated Martin Luther as the revolutionary, who with authentic German courage opposed the existing Roman and Italian political and religious establishment. (Echoes of this approach, appropriately placed in a Marxist framework, for several decades more recently emanated from East Germany). The liberal Protestant theologians, looking at the religious dimensions of Luther's personality, saw him as a man of reason and common sense, who replaced mystical traditions and authoritarian structures inherited from the past, with a rational approach to the Bible. At the same time, the emerging pietist movements stressed Luther's devotional life, with particular attention to prayer, hymnody, and family life.

With Friedrich Schleiermacher's nineteenth century emphasis on "feeling", the general attention to Luther's devotional life tended to emphasize the element of experience. Yet this was not the towering, traumatic, even transcendental, experience of the early Karl Barth, but rather the family-oriented and patriarchal glow of faith in the setting of authentic *Gemütlichkeit*. Regardless of some variation in expression, *piety* (Frömmigkeit) may be viewed as the key category for this eighteenth and nineteenth century reading of Luther.

The birth of modern Luther scholarship near the end of the nineteenth century, introduced by Theodosius Harnack,⁴ a Baltic German, found the centre of Luther's thought in *Versöhnung* and *Erlösung*, in reconciliation and redemption, hence in a Christologically oriented *faith*. In subsequent decades up to our own time, Luther's understanding of faith has served as the direct route to the very centre of his theology. Here three general trends have been of significance. Initially the concern with Luther's faith expressed an ecclesial and Lutheran orientation. In Roman Catholic response, such "faith" of Luther⁵ was quickly identified as stark heresy mingled with deficient learning. In a more recent and ecumenical perspective, the concern with Luther's faith has been nurtured in ecumenical dialogues and has yielded a rich harvest of collaborative interpretations.

Yet not all Luther interpreters have been satisfied with faith as a central category for the understanding of Luther. Most recently a rather broad and at times almost vague term, called

spirituality, has emerged. It is by no means as yet a well established category and needs further development. While some writers may use "spirituality" merely as a more up-dated version of what was formerly called "piety", or perhaps merely as a substitute for "faith", on occasion this modern term, spirituality, has served to mark the interpretative circle at its widest, and thereby as the means to avoid both a narrowly devotional and a doctrinally oriented elitist view of Luther. Here in speaking of Luther's spirituality, it has seemed fitting to bring in not only Luther's more evangelical beliefs and doctrinally astute formulations, but also Luther's prejudices and superstitions. Of course, not all of such interpretative approaches are explicitly labelled "spirituality". But under whatever headline, they show a multifaceted Luther, the pious man of faith wrestling with God and the demons, writing luminous theological texts, believing in the efficacy of witchcraft, and unashamedly using scatological language. Here is also the place to record Luther's immense hatred of the Jews, anger at the Turks, and the condescending comments on the Anabaptists and Sacramentarians—all totally unacceptable from a modern point of view. Nevertheless, a profile of Luther's spirituality, including his lofty as well as low level insights, provides an understanding of Luther as he was in his own time.

II

Now an overview of Luther scholarship by these three major categories, namely piety, faith, and spirituality, does not need to suggest that each has served out its time and then has been discarded. Rather, echoes of earlier views, more refined and appropriately up-dated, often continue into the present. Nevertheless, their distinctive characteristics can still be observed.

As a modern example of Enlightenment's concern with Luther's piety shaped by his personality, Helmut Diwald,⁶ professor of history at the University of Erlangen, may well serve. He celebrates the significance of Luther as follows: "He was too powerful, that after five hundred years he could become a victim of his many interpreters." Already a revolutionary as a monk,⁷ Luther after his religious breakthrough (which Diwald locates "around 1515") "awakened the political consciousness of the German people, their desire for freedom and a sense

of belonging together.”⁸ Yet deep in his soul Luther was a religious man; hence it was Luther’s wrestling with the meaning of sin and redemption which brought about a new self-understanding.⁹

Among the Marxist historians Gerhard Zschäbitz,¹⁰ acknowledging the centrality of Luther’s religious concerns, nevertheless locates them in the larger context of class struggle. Here Luther’s success is viewed as revolutionary only in a distinctively limited sense, struggling for change within the existing class structures. At the same time Zschäbitz is prepared to acknowledge that in his approach Luther was more effective than, say, the far more radical revolutionary Thomas Müntzer.

However, the concerns with the personal piety of Luther, his religious depth, and his German patriotism and hence his political role, are not only recent echoes from the distant age of Enlightenment, but may also be regarded as sporadic expressions of a continuously present perspective, at times almost muted, but occasionally surfacing with strength. It is perhaps not surprising that this perspective would emerge in trying war times. Thus, near the conclusion of World War I it was Karl Aner¹¹ who identified authentic piety with a national self-consciousness and hastened to endorse the verdict of Ignaz von Döllinger, the famous historian of the Old Catholic Church. Döllinger had written: “There has never been a German, who has intuitively understood his people so well, and at the same time has been so totally embraced by the nation, indeed, has been absorbed by it...”¹² Consequently, according to Aner, even Luther’s distinctively polemical writings with their occasional use of crude peasant language still serve to explain both the popularity and the relevance of Luther.¹³ Having transferred what Aner labels a “healthy naturalness” to the sphere of religion, Luther succeeded in expressing the full measure of his entire life in terms of piety.¹⁴

Lucien Febvre,¹⁵ a French scholar, continued to explore the phenomenon of Luther in terms of his personal piety. Now while this seems inevitable for a biography, it may be noted that Febvre regards as the key to Luther’s personality his religious experience and its continuous expression during his early life. Successfully, Luther “intoxicated himself and others with his transcendent idealism. Without heeding the consequences, without the regard for the powers of this world,

without thought of realities, he had cried his faith. He had developed a beautiful, heroic and vivid poem of Christian liberty..."¹⁶ Yet such a piety active in courage was not sustained till the end. In the latter part of his life, notes Febvre, Luther "lived banally, in the midst of cries, confusion, the family washing and the children's litter. Just a man, a man growing heavier, fatter, more paunchy."¹⁷ Clearly, once the initial experience has faded, no sufficient structures remained to sustain the initially great contributions. Piety, rooted in a specific religious experience, had its distinctive limits!

Written during the Nazi period, re-published and translated after World War II, Gerhard Ritter's *Luther: His Life and Work*,¹⁸ continues to join the by now familiar two elements of Luther's life—being a German and vividly experiencing God. As to the former, Ritter generalized: "To a German, Luther's character has always borne an unmistakably national stamp, and he has appeared as one of the most important architects and personalities of the national, intellectual tradition and way of life. In Germany he has always been hailed as a 'national hero.' " Writing after World War II, now in a new introduction, Ritter added: "All this has now changed."¹⁹ Nevertheless, in further analysis Ritter observed that Luther had succeeded in setting forth in writing "for the first time certain clearly definable traits of German piety."²⁰ Here central was Luther's powerful emphasis on "the immediate experience of God in the heart of the believer."²¹ And this, according to Ritter, was "the heart of the matter".²²

While, of course, it is acknowledged that the concern with personal experience²³ is infinitely wider than the rationalist/pietist tradition which began in the Age of Enlightenment, from the latter there continues to flow a narrower and more precise concern. Namely, I am referring to the interpretation of Luther's political and religious activities from his "nature" which then by way of an intuitive "reason" or a deep-seated "feeling" or a perception on account of being "German" informs and guides Luther throughout his creative activities. In this way Luther's innermost self serves as the key for the understanding of his active life and the written corpus. While the strength of such an approach is the almost common sense realization that the innermost self of a person is decisive for life and work, the weakness of the method shows up immediately when the interpreter seeks to grasp Luther's self by either

intuition or feeling or shared German character. Then scholarship has been replaced by poetic intuition and creative writing. Moreover, the emphasis on the greatness of Luther's religious experience and his heroic personality have a tendency to turn our attention to the past. While to follow Luther's example need not be the worst choice one could make in life, this approach nevertheless implies ecclesially bound limits which are not acceptable in this ecumenical age.

III

Without denying the creative significance of Luther's personality, his piety, and his role as a reformer, Luther scholarship has nevertheless devoted most of its attention to Luther's theology. Since the already mentioned ground-breaking study of Theodosius Harnack in 1862, the number of scholarly studies—capped by a virtual deluge of works, celebrating Luther's 500th birthday in 1983—has reached practically unmanageable proportions. Yet totally apart from such mundane concerns, from the very beginning of the Protestant Reformation and following Luther's own witness, the understanding of justification by grace through faith has been the central tenet as well as the organizing principle of Luther's theology. The denial of the indulgences, the sacrifice of the mass, monasticism, and celibacy were viewed by Luther as case-in-point examples of workrighteousness. Similarly, the rejection of the non-scriptural role of Virgin Mary and of the placing of papal authority and tradition above the Scriptures, all could be seen as effective applications of the doctrine of justification.

From among the very lengthy list of modern expositors of Luther's theology in general and the doctrine of justification²⁴ in particular, only a few key interpreters will have to characterize its centrality in Luther's thought.

In a scholarly paper, initially published in 1910, Karl Holl²⁵ turned to the doctrine of justification with two foci in mind: "the action of God and the experience of man".²⁶ Clearly, the former is prior, since in justification God accepts the sinner and thereby freely and without reservations enters with the sinner in a new mode of relationship,²⁷ which need not be, in fact cannot be, any further improved by any additional human efforts.²⁸ Here, following Apostle Paul, grace embraces the life

of the entire person, which is at once both accepted *and* recognized as sinful. Yet immediately, so noted Karl Holl, Luther also underscored the opposite view, namely that God justifies only the one who fulfils the law and is actually just.²⁹ This was Luther's initial way of connecting justification with sanctification, on the one hand asserting a *sola gratia* for the undeserving sinner, and on the other observing how God through faith reshapes and renews the person.³⁰ Thus, making some use of traditional terms, Luther regarded justification as instantaneous and complete, and sanctification as gradual. Beginning at the moment of justification, the process of sanctification continues throughout the person's life. According to Holl, one of the more creative contributions to the analysis of justification was the insight, that it is generally only kindness which finds access to the human heart (*Güte allein den Zugang zum Herzen findet*). And what is true in interhuman relationships, is also valid in God's dealings with people.³¹ Here Luther had joined a theological insight with devotional and interpersonal experiences. Namely, grace always proceeds toward those in need. In this way Holl sought to make clear that justification and sanctification belonged together—justification in accepting the sinner dove-tailed with the making of the sinner into a just person in sanctification. Hence, noted Holl, "grace and the justice of God do not contradict each other. In forgiveness God does not set aside moral standards. Rather, grace is the actual way through which the justice of God reaches its final goal."³²

But before the goal has been reached, in what sense is justification just? Aware of the problem, Holl suggested an analogy. At the moment when the actual healing begins, the patient is still sick. The simultaneity of health and illness is not an equilibrium. What is real, however, is the certainty of the healing process as to its outcome. Now it is this anticipated certainty, argued Karl Holl, which forms the necessary precondition for justification.³³ At times, observed Holl, Luther could attribute the certainty of justification to the individual's faith, and claim that justification would occur on account of faith (*propter fidem*). In such an affirmation Holl saw no contradiction to what had been stated above, because here faith was understood to be a gift from God. Holl wrote: "When Luther speaks of justification on account of faith, he does not view faith as a human

act, but as the successful result of divine action." Hence for Luther the following are synonyms: "to justify" (*iustificare*), "to regard as just" (*iustum reputare*), and "to make just" (*iustum efficere*).³⁴ As Luther scholarship has continued to pay detailed attention to Luther's understanding of justification by grace through faith, it seems that there is hardly a problem which has not been investigated in detail and reconsidered in various perspectives and with different concerns in mind. Nevertheless, regardless of notable differences or merely slight nuances in interpretation, justification has remained the central point of reference for the understanding of Luther's faith and theology.

Paul Althaus³⁵ may serve to illustrate the complexity which has been present in more recent Luther scholarship. Althaus begins with an analysis of "the essential structure of faith", thereby expressing the assumption that faith is not a mere act of the will to believe. Rather, as Althaus defines initially, "faith exists only as a response to God's word". The "word", of course, is none other than "the gospel" or "the word or promise".³⁶ This response involves the entire person, since trust is a matter of total life-style. As a matter of fact, paraphrasing Luther, Althaus speaks of "accepting God's promise from the heart and taking a chance on it". Or, more formally, "Faith is unconditional trust of God in his word."³⁷ Althaus notes that even though Luther often described faith from within the existential nexus of personal experience, Luther nevertheless always made it clear that this was not a "do-it-yourself faith" or a human accomplishment. Faith is always awakened in the heart by God through the Word. Hence, sums up Althaus, "Faith is God's power, it is not a human capability." When people attempt to believe with their own efforts, the result is merely "delusion" and "sin". In contrast, authentic faith arises "when a man is inwardly and spiritually convinced by the living voice of God speaking to him in the world."³⁸ The locus of the genesis of faith is "the heart" or "the conscience", an event of the total personality.³⁹ Althaus comments further: "No one can take my place, no one can intervene and take away the grace and responsibility inherent in the fact that I stand alone and by myself before God." Although the Christian community can offer help and assistance, the fact remains that "No one can ever believe for someone

else as though his faith were a substitute for the entirely personal faith of the other.”⁴⁰ Such an explanation leads Althaus to observe that “seeing and experience” needs to be distinguished from faith, as Luther repeatedly makes use of Hebrews 11:1: “Faith is the evidence of things not seen.” Namely, “Because God himself is hidden, we have him and what his word promises only by believing in the word.” This believing is never easy, and is accompanied by the always present doubt and encounter with temptation, due to human finitude and sin.⁴¹ Hence the experience of faith is one of struggle in which faith needs to confront “reason”. While in theory Luther knows of a grace-redeemed-reason, more often than not reason serves as the means for doubting and being tempted. To overcome the suggestions of sly reason, ordinarily Luther appeals to courage rather than “right reason”. Althaus accents this insight: “To believe means to abandon the viewpoint of reason and of our own heart and take a chance on God’s word and on his perspective.”⁴² Drawing on the familiar Pauline categories of the Law and the Gospel, Luther argues that faith always lives in the dialectical tension between the two.⁴³ Or, analogously, Luther can situate faith between the “wrath” and “love” of God, as well as the divine “opus alienum et opus proprium”.⁴⁴ In these several contexts the believer experiences the struggle between the attempts to gain merit, the inability of succeeding with merits—and the experience of undeserved and unearned grace.⁴⁵ What Luther regards as an authentic route to salvation is available through grace only. In the formulation of Althaus: “Man’s [sic] claim to have brought something before God which secures his position with God means nothing less than that he puts himself in the place of God and makes himself his own God and creator. For he dares thereby to do what God has reserved for himself alone: to create righteousness and life.”⁴⁶ Pre-ecumenically, rashly, and mistakenly, although with eloquence and sincerity, as Althaus notes, “Luther places Judaism, Islam, the papacy, monasticism, the enthusiasts [i.e. the Anabaptists and Spiritualists] and the Swiss all in the same category as encouraging presumptuous human pride, idolatry, and contradicting genuine fear of God (in the sense of Psalm 130:4).”⁴⁷

Now the point of being concerned with Luther’s understanding of faith, is not merely to interpret one of his doctrines, but

to confront Luther at the centre of his thought. Althaus underscores:

The doctrine of justification is not simply one doctrine among many but—as Luther declares—the basic and chief article of faith with which the church stands and falls, and on which its entire doctrine depends. The doctrine of justification is ‘the summary of Christian doctrine,’ ‘the sun which illumines God’s holy church.’ It is the unique possession of Christianity and ‘distinguishes our religion from all other.’⁴⁸

More precisely, the essence of justification by grace through faith is found in its soteriological base and therefore in Jesus Christ. Or, most generally, the words of Althaus, “The doctrine of justification is nothing else than faith in Christ, when this is properly understood.”⁴⁹ And since faith is salvifically effective, so also must be justification. Hence, according to Althaus, justification is not merely declaratory, but already “essentially” effective, even though it “remains incomplete on earth and is first completed on the Last Day.”⁵⁰ While generally endorsing Karl Holl’s interpretation, which affirmed that righteousness had already begun and was not merely declaratory, Althaus has entered a significant correction: the actual beginning of being righteous, according to Luther, does not rest on a “proleptic-analytic” basis: “God now declares that man to be righteous who will be righteous at some time in the future.” Instead, Althaus suggests that in justification the sinner obtains “the imputation of Christ’s ‘alien’ righteousness”,⁵¹ that is, that “justification is based on reconciliation through Christ’s satisfaction.”⁵² In other words, faith is able to justify not in its own power, but “because Christ makes himself present in us through it.”⁵³

In this way while the *sola gratia* theme remains central, it is accompanied by *sola fides* and *solus Christus* and in this context there emerges a significant place for human responsibility and “good works”. At times one may wonder whether the shift toward recognized activism in Lutheran theology does not in a way reflect the change of ecclesial and political circumstances. Where in a state church situation the challenge for initiative was not ordinarily placed at the door of the Lutheran church, the need for survival in a democratic society or under authoritarian oppression has challenged scholars to recognize the measure of genuine activism which has always been present

in Luther's thought. In such a shift of perspective, Luther's opposition to the various "enemies", so designated on account of their attributed "work-righteousness", is no longer inflexible. The analogous concerns for "faith active in love" in fact demand that distinctions in the theological procedure and structural formation be not regarded as absolutely contradictory and in principle irreconcilable. Such an ecumenical sensitivity, however, need not be attributed to Lutheran theology alone, but may also be noted in the interpretation of Luther "from outside".

Pre-ecumenical Roman Catholic scholarship ordinarily took for its point of departure the person of Luther, and at times had a field day in recounting his various shortcomings, blasphemies and heresies. Today it has been most often Luther's definition of faith and exposition of justification which have engaged the more creative and generally positive comments. Here two relatively brief examples will need to suffice.

Peter Manns,⁵⁴ often appreciative of the still valuable contributions of the great Roman Catholic historian Joseph Lortz as well as desirous to move further ahead, has offered the helpful observation that while Luther distinguished between faith and love, he never separated between them "in the sense of Nygren's thesis".⁵⁵ At the same time, Manns has not hesitated to speak of Luther's shortcomings and errors. His charming formulation that Luther is both a *simul hereticus et Pater in Fide*⁵⁶ remains an intriguing suggestion of a potentially positive value. Particularly Lutheran scholars may need to be reminded that *errare humanum est* and that, in principle, Luther should not be exempt from this opportunity, and that once the principle is acknowledged it should be concretely and visibly put to use. Here at least three such areas may be briefly indicated. *First*, since it is now generally recognized that Lutherans and Roman Catholics can basically agree on the doctrine of justification,⁵⁷ without, however, attributing to it the same structural location and significance, it is worth inquiring what factors contributed to the exalted status which Luther attributed to justification. Did Luther's negative reaction to Ockhamist work-righteousness (*facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam!*)⁵⁸ lead him to overstate the case? Was justification a way of recording his own subjective

conversion experience?⁵⁹ Or, did the emphasis on this Augustinian reading of St. Paul serve as the more obvious way of opposing the overbearing authority, interpreted ecclesially from Rome?⁶⁰ These, and admittedly other important questions, refer to a variety of other issues, broader than merely the doctrine of justification. The medieval roots, Luther's personality, and his historical struggles nevertheless are issues that can be well understood and formulated in reference to the motif of justification. Of course, the reference to justification dare not exclude other issues, or the study of Luther is grossly oversimplified.

Second, the concern with Luther's theology, centered in justification, is to a significant degree a venture oriented to the past—regardless whether directed narrowly or widely. And here the basic evaluation of history plays a significant hermeneutical role. Otto Hermann Pesch⁶¹ has observed that ordinarily Roman Catholics view the history of doctrine in a positive light, acknowledging no ecclesially committed major doctrinal errors which would later need to be corrected. At the same time, notes Pesch, Protestants (presumably at least of the Lutheran variety) are often inclined to subscribe to a perspective of downfall and doom. After Apostle Paul the truth, so it has been claimed, was "lost" for fifteen hundred years till Luther; and after Luther, so it is also often claimed, a decline has set in quickly! Neither a onesided optimism or equally onesided pessimism, claims Pesch, has been helpful in understanding church history. In regard to Luther it has been clearly disastrous for Luther's admirers. They, overlooking the presence of the Holy Spirit, had found it necessary to see a doom and gloom situation immediately after Apostle Paul, similarly after St. Augustine, and especially after Luther. Yet, in regard to Catholic scholarship, a reorientation is also in order, so as not to attribute all the wrongs and down-falls to the heretics outside the true church, while the church itself marches on in blissful progress and sanctity!⁶²

Third, as the doctrine of justification continues to serve as the key to Luther's theology and biography, we need to return to the earlier observation in regard to the role of Ockhamism in Luther's thought. The workrighteousness taught within this late medieval movement was deepseated. In criticising Ockhamism and rebelling against a church which had

espoused it, so noted the great Joseph Lortz, "Luther defeated in his own soul a mode of Catholicism which was not catholic!" (*Luther rang in sich selbst einen Katholizismus nieder, der nicht katholisch war!*).⁶³ Today this has been recognized, as the relationship between the Reformation and the late Middle Ages is a relatively well explored area.⁶⁴ However, it would be naive to imagine that contemporary culture does not continue to offer both friendly and hostile influences to which contemporary theologians—as well as historians of religious thought!—are subject. Insofar as a living concern with Luther's thought cannot remain in the realm of the past where reliable expositions were accomplished by preceding generations, the risk of faith and of scholarship cannot be avoided. It is only by trial and error, by research and venture, by advances and retreats that life in the present allows us to deal with the past. Therefore no age is exempt from the need to remain open to new ways of finding access to Luther.

IV

As a basic directional orientation, panoramic and stable, *spirituality* has of late offered a special appeal. But what is "spirituality"? At least two current emphases may be noted. Namely, spirituality can be understood either inwardly or outwardly, that is as an experienced reality within one's soul, or as a lived relationship. A. Skevington Wood⁶⁵ has noted both emphases in such formulae as "the communion of the believer with God", and "the response of the human spirit when activated by the Spirit of God". Alister McGrath⁶⁶ has paid more attention to the outward and relational dimension of spirituality, namely: "Spirituality represents the interface between ideas and life, between Christian theology and human existence."⁶⁷

The construction of a model for spirituality, in the study of Luther, however, does not appear to be an entirely new venture. It is possible to observe analogies both to models of "piety" and "feeling", as well as to the model of "justification by faith". The former may be seen as well exemplified by Louis Bouyer.⁶⁸ According to Bouyer, a French Roman Catholic, attempts to secure salvation through his own efforts had only plunged Luther into "the feeling of stagnation and despair",⁶⁹ from which he, however, was released by a vivid

"double intuition": Luther discovered that "grace was a gratuitous gift of divine generosity alone in the crucified Christ" and "rediscovered, that the Word of God was God's personal intervention in the believer's life, and that vital faith in the Word was the most personal act that the believer could make."⁷⁰ Now, observed Bouyer, in order to express this powerful discovery Luther had no other means at his disposal than the thought patterns of his time. By the end of the Middle Ages, suggested Bouyer, the creative coinherence of transcendence and immanence had been lost. At one extreme, God was regarded as an absolute Sovereign, remote and annihilating.⁷¹ At the other extreme, workrighteousness afforded an easy reconciliation with God. Caught between these two essentially inadequate options, Luther rejected immanence and settled for transcendence, that is, in turning away from workrighteousness, Luther turned to the remote and annihilating Sovereign God. Consequently, Luther's "liberating intuition" failed to achieve a sound theological expression.⁷² Noted Bouyer:

So we arrive at this paradox that, for want of an adequate expression, he pushed to the furthest extreme the one most inadequate for affirming this personalism: namely, forensic justification. Going against all idea of man [sic] possessing merits of his own outside the living relationship with Christ, he proclaimed that Christ saves us by faith, but without having to change us in any way, therefore without faith having to be "informed" (as the schoolmen said) by love and that he did this precisely so as to maintain that we cannot be saved except in the relationship wherein Christ establishes us with him.⁷³

While it is possible to criticize Bouyer for depending on older Luther scholarship and neglecting the role of sanctifying grace, Bouyer has nevertheless called attention to a significant issue, viz. the difference between experience and expression. Although we do not have a direct access to the primary intuitive source, we can make some inferences. It is legitimate, claimed Bouyer, to "distinguish between the primary vision and the theological terms in which it was expressed." Just how Bouyer accomplished this important task, however, is not made very clear. Perhaps intuitive creativity on his part is the sufficient answer. In any event, Bouyer affirmed that Luther's "authentically Christian... vision was man's [sic] personal relationship—on the sole basis of faith in Christ, God

made man and crucified for man—with the God who reveals himself in the essential act of his transcendent love engraved for ever at the heart of our history.”⁷⁴ Struggling through Luther’s various descriptions of this vision, Bouyer discovered that his own initial intuition of the character of Luther’s spirituality had been confirmed. Specifically, yet necessarily broadly, Bouyer pointed to Luther opening the Bible to lay people “who, we suspect, had never seen anything like it since patristic times.” Also, Bouyer observed the “renewal of preaching and catechetical teaching.” In this way Luther had brought into the open the “vivid sense of the Word of God’s creative and salvific action.”⁷⁵

At the same time, noted Bouyer, Luther’s “particular charism” can be seen “in the direct and compelling way” in which he could grasp and then communicate both “the spirituality of the dogma” and “the savour of the Bible”.⁷⁶ As an example of Luther’s ability to express the great scriptural truth in a clear and compelling language, Bouyer quoted Luther’s commentary on the Christological section of the Apostles’ creed:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death, in order that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.⁷⁷

Moreover, according to Bouyer, Luther’s spiritual contributions were further enhanced by his liturgical innovations, notably through the use of the vernacular. Insofar as the lay people did not understand Latin, they did not realize the actual changes which were accomplished. Without necessarily defending these, Bouyer nevertheless evaluated quite positively: “Thus the Lutheran Mass gave them a piety in which nearly all the positive elements of medieval popular piety were not only retained but enriched—as much by the meditated hearing of God’s Word as by Communion (and frequent at that) as normal and integral part of the celebration.”⁷⁸ Last but not least, Bouyer also underscored the significance of Luther’s interpretation of Christian freedom and individual vocation, in

the process reviving the ancient doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.⁷⁹

In this way, without providing a complete account of all the dimensions of Luther's spirituality, Bouyer had nevertheless noted those areas where Luther's own creativity most intensively influenced the spirituality of his followers. Thus the strength of Bouyer's approach may well be the sensitivity with which he approached the subject matter as well as the concern to find a standard for his selectivity, which for him was the positive infectiousness of Luther's spirituality. At the same time Bouyer writes in a pre-ecumenical mode: wherever in any significant way Luther happens to differ from the Roman Catholic church, he is assumed to be in error. Yet even that is more acknowledged than ardently pursued, and never overstated.

But Luther's spirituality can be explored not only with echoes of "piety", but also with significant attention to the insights gained in a more theological and justification-by-grace-through-faith orientation. Here a recent example has been provided by Marc Lienhard.⁸⁰ After a brief preface, Lienhard leads the reader through such key theological topics, historically outlined, as *The Emergence of a Theology, Conflict with Rome, The Affirmation of Faith, Law and Gospel, The Word, Faith and Sign, Authority and Holy Scripture, The Union of the Believer with Christ, The Priesthood of All Believers, The Setting of Christian Life and Vocation, The Edifications of Christians, Or How Spirituality is Nourished* (and this in twelve lines, reporting on Luther's translation of the Bible and its use), *Preaching and Catechesis, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*,⁸¹ all total, so far, in 16 pages. In the remaining 12 pages the concern with spirituality is expressed more directly. Thus in dealing with "Confession" we are informed that in 1523 Luther introduced "an examination of conscience before communion".⁸² Under "Hymns and Images" we are informed that hymns projected both justification and a concern with incarnation and atonement. Images were generally retained.⁸³ While "Prayer, Community Prayer, and Personal Prayer"⁸⁴ are briefly identified, "The Communion of Saints"⁸⁵ is quickly acknowledged, while an invocation of saints is rejected. The more creative and evaluative statements are reserved near the conclusion of the entire discussion and entitled "Lines of Strength of Lutheran Spirituality", observing that in contrast to ascetic life, Luther

exalted marriage. Lienhard insists that "Luther's spirituality promotes joy in life; the smile of the person responds to that of God the creator"—without denying the reality of a suffering world and succumbing to the nostalgic hope for "the dear last days".⁸⁶ Under the headline "The Life of Faith" we are informed that "*Faith* is evidently the key word in Lutheran spirituality".⁸⁷ Yet having faith is not viewed as anything like a serene experience or a doctrinal formulation, but a faithful existence in a world full of conflicts, hence leaving "much room for the trials and doubts".⁸⁸ A further section entitled "Christian Battle" underscores the believer's life as an ongoing struggle against the powers of evil.⁸⁹ "Spirituality and Ethics" stress the need for love and good works.⁹⁰ Finally, "God the Judge and Redeemer: History at the End of Time" speaks in terms of fear and confidence of the coming events awaited in faith.⁹¹

As may be noted with some appreciation, Marc Lienhard has sought to offer a working profile of Luther's spirituality in terms of the main themes of Luther's theology and ethics. These have been then joined with an overview of Luther's major devotional concerns. In a short space he has thereby supplied a useful agenda for a further exploration of Luther's spirituality. Regrettably, a brief summary, like a mere index, is by itself not illuminating. Yet it is at least valuable in the sense that it reminds the scholarly reader that Luther's spirituality can be no less than Luther's entire thought and devotional life.

Similar attempts to identify Luther's spirituality by an overview of his insights and devotional practices have been undertaken by other scholars as well, with generally the same results.⁹²

In my judgment perhaps some of the more helpful contributions toward the definition of Luther's spirituality have been made by some interpreters who, although not employing the term "spirituality", have nevertheless looked at Luther's life and thought covering the entire spectrum from superb theological insights to low level popular superstition and prejudice. Here the *simul* of Luther's definition of justification (*simul iustus et peccator*) has been used in describing how Luther actually believed and lived. Perhaps one of the most successful accounts of Luther's total spirituality was offered by Roland H. Bainton.⁹³ And more recently, an in-depth exploration of

Luther's total spirituality is offered by Heiko A. Oberman, especially in his *Luther: Man Between God and Devil*.⁹⁴ There Oberman challenges:

We must be prepared to leave behind our own view of life and the world: to cross centuries of confessional and intellectual conflict in order to become his contemporary. When the Church was still equated with Heaven, and the Emperor represented the might of the world, a monk named Luther rose up against these powers of Heaven and Earth: he stood alone with God and his omnipresent adversary, the Devil.⁹⁵

Now if Luther, in order to be understood, must be seen as a man of his own time, then the search for his spirituality must also begin in the sixteenth century. While modern Luther scholarship can be helpful in assisting us to locate with precision the central insights of the theology of Luther, to be fully understood these must be viewed in their ancient context. A good case-in-point is Luther's concern with the devil, to which Oberman calls our attention:

Luther's world of thought is wholly distorted and apologetically misconstrued if his conception of the Devil is dismissed as a medieval phenomenon and only his faith in Christ retained as relevant or as the only decisive factor.... There is no way to grasp Luther's milieu of experience and faith unless one has an acute sense of his view of Christian existence between God and the Devil: without the recognition of Satan's power, belief in Christ is reduced to an idea about Christ—and Luther's faith becomes a confused delusion in keeping with the tenor of his time.⁹⁶

Yet while the spiritual profile of Luther is perceived at its centre in observing Luther in his struggle between God and the Devil, a complete account must obviously proceed further. Then justification by grace through faith needs to be clarified with attention to the theology of the cross, the God who is both hidden and revealed, and the distinction between Law and Gospel. At the same time, Luther's lofty faith must also be balanced by attention to his many hates, prejudices, and outbursts of anger, and hence his hermeneutical limitations when dealing with the papacy, the Anabaptists, the Jews, the Turks, the sacramentarians—in fact when confronting anyone with whom Luther disagreed. As a believer who is existentially both *simul iustus et peccator*, Luther developed a spirituality which was at same time profound and faulty. Nevertheless, if we do no more than look at Luther's shortcomings, and investigate his timebound political views, his belief in witchcraft,

and his remarkably limited view of the world, we are merely glancing at a periphery of Luther's thought. Luther's spirituality is not to be found at the margins of his theology and life. Still, these margins are valuable for the total grasp of his spirituality when seen in appropriate context and correlation.

The recent use made of the category of *spirituality* will, no doubt, need to be greatly elaborated and deepened before it is significantly useful. At the moment, however, without undue enthusiasm, I find it enriching insofar as it warns that theology does not dwell in the abstract, but grows and is nurtured in the concrete pastures of life. Thus spirituality points not only to Luther's best accomplishments, but also dwells on his shortcomings, and thereby insures that depth can never be measured without the awareness of its limits.

Notes

- ¹ The best guide to Luther scholarship still is the *Luther Jahrbuch* which through lead articles and bibliography informs of the ongoing developments. Also see Roland H. Bainton and Eric W. Gritsch, *Bibliography of the Continental Reformation: Materials Available in English*, 2nd ed. (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1972); Steven Ozment, ed., *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research* (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982); Paul D. Petersen, ed., *Luther and Lutheranism: A Bibliography Selected from ATLA Religion Database* (Chicago, IL: American Theological Library Association, 1985).
- ² Egil Grisliis, "Luther in Review: Approaches in Major Studies—A Bibliographical Perspective," *Word & World*, 3/4 (1983) 435–447; Peter Manns, ed., *Zur Bilanz des Lutherjahres* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH., 1986).
- ³ Cf. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther im Spiegel der deutschen Geistesgeschichte: Mit ausgewählten Texten von Lessing bis zur Gegenwart* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970, 2nd ed.).
- ⁴ Theodosius Harnack, *Luthers Theologie mit besonderer Beziehung auf seine Versöhnungs- und Erlösungslehre* (1862 and 1865, rep. München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1927).
- ⁵ Hartmann Grisar, S.J., *Luther* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herdersche Verlagshandlung, 1–3, 1911–1912); *Martin Luther: His Life and Work: Adapted from the Second German Edition* by Frank J. Eble (Westminster, MD: The Westminster Press, 1955).
- ⁶ Helmut Diwald, *Luther: Eine Biographie* (Bergisch Gladbach: Gustav Lübbe GmbH, 1982).
- ⁷ Ibid. 8.
- ⁸ Ibid. 9.

- 9 Ibid. 371.
- 10 Gerhard Zschäbitz, *Martin Luther: Grösse und Grenze* (Teil I (1483–1526), Berlin V E B: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1967).
- 11 Karl Aner, *Das Luthervolk: Ein Gang durch die Geschichte seiner Frömmigkeit* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1917).
- 12 Ibid. 1.
- 13 Ibid. 11.
- 14 Ibid. 15.
- 15 Lucien Febvre, *Martin Luther: A Destiny*, trans. Roberts Tapley (NY: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc. [1927]).
- 16 Ibid. 164.
- 17 Ibid. 286.
- 18 Gerhard Ritter, *Luther: His Life and Work*, trans. from the 1959 German ed. by John Riches (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963; earlier German editions of 1935 and 1942).
- 19 Ibid. 15.
- 20 Ibid. 19.
- 21 Ibid. 20.
- 22 Ibid. 43.
- 23 Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1958); Roger A. Johnson, ed., *Psychohistory and Religion: The Case of Young Man Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); Bengt R. Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics: A Re-Examination of Luther's Spiritual Experience and His Relationship to the Mystics* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976).
- 24 Otto Hermann Pesch, *Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin: Versuch eines systematisch-theologischen Dialogs* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1967); Ulrich Kühn and Otto Hermann Pesch, *Rechtfertigung im Gespräch zwischen Thomas und Luther* (Berlin: Lutherische Verlagsanstalt, 1967); Otto Hermann Pesch and Albrecht Peters, *Einführung in die Lehre von Gnade und Rechtfertigung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981); Otto Hermann Pesch, *Gerechtfertigt aus Glauben: Luthers Frage an die Kirche*, Quaestiones Disputatae, 97 (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1981); Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- 25 Karl Holl, "Die Rechtfertigungslehre in Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Frage der Heilsgewissheit," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte: I Luther* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1948, 7th ed.).
- 26 Ibid. 113.
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- 30 Ibid. 119–120.
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- 32 Ibid. 123.
- 33 Ibid. 124–125.
- 34 Ibid. 127.
- 35 Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).
- 36 Ibid. 43.
- 37 Ibid. 44.
- 38 Ibid. 50.
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- 40 Ibid. 54.
- 41 Ibid. 56.
- 42 Ibid. 57.
- 43 Ibid. 58.
- 44 Ibid. 120.
- 45 Ibid. 121–122.
- 46 Ibid. 125.
- 47 Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 128; Egil Grislis, "Luther and the Turks," *The Muslim World*, 64/3 and 4 (1974) 180–193, 275–291.
- 48 Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 224; Stephan Pfurtner, "The Paradigms of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther: Did Luther's Message of Justification Mean a Paradigm Change?" in Hans Küng and David Tracy, eds., *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 135–137.
- 49 Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 225.
- 50 Ibid. 226.
- 51 Ibid. 241.
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- 53 Ibid. 232.
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- 55 Ibid. 16, cf. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1954).
- 56 Peter Manns and Harding Meyer, *Luther's Ecumenical Significance*, 21; Peter Manns, *Vater im Glauben: Studien zur Theologie Martin Luthers* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH, 1988).
- 57 H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985).
- 58 Cf. Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

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- 61 Otto Herman Pesch, *Hinführung zu Luther* (Mainz: MatthiasGrüne-wald Verlag, 1982).
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- 64 Steven Ozment, ed., *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective* (Chi-cago: Quadrangle Books, 1971); *The Age of Reform 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980).
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- 68 Louis Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality, III Orthodox Spiritu-ality and Protestant and Anglican Spirituality*, English trans. Barbara Wall (London: Burns & Oates and New York: Desclee Co., Inc., 1969), rpr. New York: The Seabury Press, n.d.).
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- 77 Instead of quoting from Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality*, 72–73, I have preferred the standard text, *The Book of Concord: The Con-fessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed.. Theodore G. Tappert et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) 345.
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- 83 Ibid. 285–286.
- 84 Ibid. 286–288.

- 85 Ibid. 289-291.
- 86 Ibid. 291-292.
- 87 Ibid. 292.
- 88 Ibid. 293.
- 89 Ibid. 293-294.
- 90 Ibid. 294-296.
- 91 Ibid. 296.
- 92 David Tripp, "Luther, Martin, Lutheran Spirituality," in Gordon S. Wakefield ed., *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983) 253-255; D.H.Tripp, "Luther," in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold, S.J., eds., *The Study of Spirituality* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 343-346; Frank C. Senn, "Lutheran Spirituality," in Frank C. Senn, ed., *Protestant Spiritual Traditions* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986) 9-54.
- 93 Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950).
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- 95 Ibid. xix.
- 96 Ibid. 104.